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ABSTRACT

Since the 1950s, parenting and childhood in America have changed dramatically. Childhood as a period in which to grow at one's own pace in a protected environment largely removed from adult supervision has given way to a new era in which the parent acts as supervisor and director of the child's development. Such involvement, especially by middle class parents, places unnecessary strain on children to compete and achieve, and often places unrealistic expectations on them. Ironically, whereas more is now known about individual differences in child development, the knowledge is poorly used: In reality, children's behaviors and abilities are compared with school standards or norms. Whether in school or on the playing field, the child is persistently pressured to perform competitively, and his or her performance is constantly measured and recorded; childhood more and more resembles the purposeful, success-centered, competitive world of adults. In many ways, children are expected to be miniature adults, but they are not provided the social status and privilege of adults. Excessive pressure on adolescents may lead to several undesirable outcomes, including narcissism in adulthood, escapist involvement with drugs or cults, burn-out, and feelings of anomie or normlessness. It is likely that such trends will continue. Unfortunately, childhood in the year 2000 will be marked by an intensification of the pressures and fears that characterize contemporary times. (RH)

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MIDDLE-CLASS CHILDHOOD: BUILDING A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OR EARLY BURN-OUT

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Parenting and childhood have changed dramatically from the period of the 1950s. The 1950s was a period of tranquility, stability and seemingly unending prosperity. The ideal family was seen as a family with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as a full-time mother and homemaker. Children were to be protected and nurtured by the family. Childhood was a time for children to experiment and to develop at their own pace. Children's play consisted of playing games such as hide-and-seek, hopscotch, tag and maybe sandlot baseball. Hobbies such as stamp collecting, building models, or collecting bottle caps filled many a child's leisure hours. Supervised activities were few and often meant that the child attended brownies or cub scouts during the school year and maybe camp in the summer. Camp was a time for children to be with other children, to relax and enjoy themselves, and to grow strong and healthy in the country air. Cookouts, hiking, swimming, group singing and other group activities were low key and primarily non-competitive.

Today's middle-class child has little time for unstructured activities or time to just play. Parents carefully structure almost every hour of a child's free time. In fact, if you talk to children today few have hobbies. Building model airplanes and collecting stamps are considered an anachronism,

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a vestige of their parents' generation. Many children today have every afternoon and weekend scheduled whether it be playing Little League baseball, swimming on swim team or going to music lessons. There is little time to read or just relax. The few moments of leisure are often spent watching t.v. or playing video games which the educated parent knows may be harmful to the child's development. The resourceful parent then to lure his child away from the t.v. and video games makes sure his child is doing something constructive. This means that the child is in some scheduled activity.

Even camps today are specialized. One doesn't go to camp just to play but rather to gain some skills or to improve oneself. Tennis camps, computer camps, remedial skills camps and even camps for losing weight are the types of specialized camps that abound. Many "traditional" camps have folded or have adapted by offering activities such as learning how to program a computer.

These changes reflect structural changes in the society and in the family. Today the traditional family with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as a full-time homemaker with two or more children is no longer the norm and comprises only a minority of families. Dual career families, single parent families and step-families are common. In 1950 only 24% of wives in two parent families worked. Today dual career families are the majority with over 50% of wives working. 21% of families with children are one parent families and 90% of these are female headed. A diversity of family patterns and lifestyles will continue to be the norm in the future. The "traditional" family of the 1950s will be seen as one of many alternative types of families and as one that is suitable only for parents with very young children. The concept of child-mother dependency is being replaced by the concept of early independence. The majority of children today don't

come home from school to be greeted by mother with cookies and milk. Many children come home to empty houses, go to after school daycare or participate in YMCA programs or go to other afterschool activities. These activities then fulfill two needs of the modern parent - supervision and training of the child.

Childhood as a period to grow at one's own pace in a protected environment largely removed from adult supervision has given way to a new era of the parent as supervisor and director of the child's development. This change in parenting has been referred to by Winn (1983) as the change from the "age of protection" to the "age of preparation."

Keniston compares the new parenting role to that of a weak executive. He states:

> ...parents today have a demanding new role choosing, meeting, talking with, and coordinating the experts, the technology, and the institutions that help bring up their children. The specific work involved is familiar to any parent: consultations with teachers, finding good health care, trying to monitor television watching, and so. No longer able to do it all themselves, parents are in some ways like the executives in a large firm - responsible for the smooth coordination of the many people and processes that must work together to produce the final product. (1977:17)

The Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the Sexual Revolution, and the Technological Revolution, all have changed American life and brought rapid social change. Inflation, the changing nature of jobs, the changing family, have all lead to uncertainty and to a greater feeling that parent's cannot guarantee the future of their children. Each child is now seen a competitior in the marketplace. Each individual will have to rely on his or her knowledge and skills to be able to compete. Parents are now concerned with not only how to prepare their children for a new age but also how to give them a competitive advantage.

The idea that each one of us is an equal competitor and that our success or lack of success is solely dependent upon our performance is not new. The American ideology is and has been that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. The emphasis on individual competition is a dominant theme in American society. The competitive spirit extends from the business realm to the sports realm to almost all aspects of American life. Rankings have always been a part of American life, but today the ranking of children at earlier ages is taking on greater significance. These rankings are becoming more fixed and are being seen as indicative of present and future performance.

Increasing population size, bureaucratization of society, technological complexity, and high mobility rates have led to increased competition and anonymity in terms of who are the competitors. Family background, neighborhood setting, personality of the individual have become less and less important. The individual is judged more and mroe on "performance" or extrinsic measures of achievement than on personal or intrinsic characteristics. Competition for getting jobs and especially getting top level jobs has increased. Middle class parents are more and more concerned with how to aid their children.

In a mass society we have become as Vance Packard would say a "nation of strangers." With this anonymity and increased competition comes a need for some type of "objective" criteria of performance. More and more we look for external criteria or measures. Test scores such as IQ, achievement, and grades have become the criteria for measuring performance. In the past this ranking used to be confined primarily to late adolescence or young adulthood. Today competition and ranking for some children begins as early as 3 or 4 when they enter nursery school. For others it begins in kinder-

garten. Many 5 and 6 year olds are also learning to compete on the athletic field in tee ball, soccer or mite hockey.

The pressure that parents, teachers, and coaches now put on young children is due as Winn says to a change in parental philosophy. "once parents struggled to preserve children's innocence.... The new era operates on the belief that children must be exposed early to adult experience in order to survive in an increasingly complex and uncontrollable world." (1983:5)

In the past children were left to develop at their own rates and parental expectations for performance were lower. As Elkind's states "...the 1940s and 1950s, the Freudian influence was great and many middle-class parents were afraid of repressing their children and of making them neurotic through too much discipline." (1981:xi)

Many middle-class parents today believe that to be a good parent means to structure their children's lives. This structuring and early parental involvement is thought to foster earlier academic, emotional, social and physical development. The belief is that the earlier a child masters a particular skill, the more proficient he or she will become.

This early parental involvement is placing unnecessary strain on children to achieve at early ages and is often placing unrealistic expectations on them. As Elkind says "There is no room today for the "late bloomers," the children who come into their own later in life rather than earlier.... Children have to achieve success early or they are regarded as losers." (1981:17)

The irony of this is that although we now know more about child development than in the past, we are using our knowledge poorly. We know that children vary in their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development

and that their development does not always proceed at a uniform rate. In other words, one child may proceed at a fairly uniform rate and another may seem to make a quantum jump after a slow start. We talk in our schools about individualization of programs and helping each child to develop at his own rate to his fullest. In reality we measure children in a class in terms of the group. The comparison is based on the group or class in which the child is in school. The comparisons are usually based on a local rather than a national norm. Therefore, competition varies based on setting. A child in a middle class suburban school may have much higher standards for achievement placed on him than a child in a more heterogenous school. Often the standard within the school is not even based on the average student, but on the most proficient child. All others are ranked in comparison.

At an early age parents and teachers make invidious comparisons and establish "winners" and "losers." Children are classified as slow learners, average, above average and gifted. The consequences of these labels may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words expectations may come to determine outcomes. These tracks may be very difficult to break out of. Children also learn to accept their labels. The need for early academic achievement is just one area in which middle class children may feel strain and perhaps experience unnecessary failure.

In a moment, we will examine further the pressures today on middle class suburban youth. But first lets look at the possible results. Early parental pressure for a child to achieve can result in what Elkind calls "hurried children." "Hurried children" are children who were pushed in their early years toward many different types of achievement. These children suffer from pressures to achieve that have been placed on them by parents,

teachers, coaches and others. According to Elkind, today's hurried children suffer from the fears and consequences of failure.

> ...in adolescence, the symptoms of "hurried children" become most evident, often taking the form of severe anxiety about academic success.... drug use is often associated with school failure. Even young people who are doing well academically may be tempted to fall into drug use because of the great personal toll that their effort to succeed exacts. (1979:38)

According to Elkind the problems of these children rests not with individuals who are bad parents, but rather with the social structure that produces this type of parenting.

> ...when a million 12 to 17 year-olds get pregnant each year, and one in five uses drugs more than once a week - when increasing numbers of adolescents take the more drastic steps of running away, committing acts of violence, or taking their own lives - we have to look beyond individual families to the social dynamics shaping parenting practices. (1979:38)

Different youth obviously handle these pressures in different ways. Some youth feel more pressure than others. Parental expectations vary. The degree to which a youth internalizes these expectations also varies. But those that experience strain are not just those youth that find it difficult to compete academically or athletically. In fact, those youths who are "near the top" may be the ones who experience the greatest strain.

Academic strain may begin very early. Middle class parents and teachers put a great deal of pressure on children at an early age to read and write well. Academic expectations are high. Parents often expect their children to be at the top of the class. The parents in going through school may have always done well. However, the expectations for their own academic development were not as high. Although reading was a skill that was begun to be learned in first grade, no one in the past really worried about the child being able to read with any degree of proficiency until at least

third grade. Today parents and teachers expect first and second graders to be able to read simple books on their own. Many parents work with their children in the hopes of giving them an edge or to make sure that the child can compete. The child in this situation not only feels unduly pressured to succeed, but feels the parents' sense of urgency in his mastering academic material at a very early age. His self-worth seems tied to his academic achievement. His "lack of success" is seen not only as his failure but also as giving his parents a sense of failure. If the child is successful the parents often expect him to constantly be first and to constantly surpass his classmates. No matter how successful one is, there is always the fear of failure. Failure here is relative. It may just mean not being first. If the child is labeled "gifted" his parents and teachers may expect him or her to be gifted in all areas and at all times. Again, an obviously unrealistic expectation, but if the child internalizes this expectation strain will evolve.

As John Holt says one dysfunction of the school is:

> Schools grade, label and channel the young. This, presumably, is contrary to the true process of education. We cannot expect young people to trust us if they know, as before long almost all of them do, that a major part of a modern educator's job is compiling records that will be used to judge them for the rest of their lives.
>
> Schools divide the young into winners and losers and then train them to accept their roles.... (Sebald, 1977:53)

But success in the school is just one area in which the child at an early age is expected to excel. Play too is now structured. Games are no longer spontaneous and for fun. Since WW II, children's play has been transformed from informal games to highly organized sporting events. Adults now organize and direct most sports programs for children from Little League Baseball to youth soccer. Today these programs mirror pro-

fessional teams. The play ethic associated with children's games of playing to have fun, to relax, to let off steam has shifted to teaching skills, to developing character, to developing winners and professionals.

Postman, for example, laments that children's games have become an endangered species. (1982:4) Indicative of this is the fact that now children as young as 5 or 6 years are playing Charlie Brown Baseball, Mite hockey and Pop Warner football. In team sports children by age 8 are eligible for travel teams and can play all over the state for trophies and state championships. At very young ages we are establishing sports elites. Status in the school and community is often based on the child's athletic participation and parents often bask in the vicarious prestige of having an athletic son or daughter. Tremendous pressure is placed on these youth for high levels of performance and to win. In team sports a hierarchy of sports performance is established early with the ranking as follows: travel teams, house or recreational teams, and non-athletes. In team sports by age 13 the less successful (success here being measured in terms of whether or not one made a travel team) drop out of sports entirely. Rather than these youths seeing physical exercise as something to enjoy throughout life, they often see themselves as nonathletic. In some respects, perhaps, they are the lucky ones. The ones that are left are still involved in endless pressure to improve their performance and involved in constant team tryouts. The competition to make the junior high and high school varsity teams is even more competitive than the earlier travel teams. These youth who "fail" at this point have a lot invested in their performance. Others at this point may "burn out" because there has just been too much pressure too early and they drop out. As Tutko says "winning is like drinking salt water - you keep wanting more and it never quenches your thirst." There is constant pressure to do better and constant fear that you won't succeed.

Individual sports such as swimming and gymnastics may even exert more pressure on youth than team sports. Swimmers often swim every morning before school and again after school. They are also required to lift weights and do other types of conditioning. Weekends are spent in competition. In an individual sport the pressure is solely on the individual. There is no team to share defeat.

Rather than sports serving as a release from strain, a safety-valve, sports have produced a pressure cooker situation. With those children who participate constantly being judged on how well they perform. Their performance is constantly judged against the best in the sport as well as against their own best performance. The irony here is that the child who matures early physically has a distinct advantage over the smaller late maturer. The late maturer or small child is often eliminated from the competition regardless of physical ability.

Whether in school or on the playing field the child is constantly pressured to perform and his performance is constantly measured and recorded. In school there are elaborate records on each child from grades, to IQ scores to standardized achievement tests. On the playing field there are records such as batting averages, number of goals scored and number of errors committed. In swimming, times are kept on every event. The child soon internalizes the message that activities that can't be measured such as imaginative play or daydreaming are frivolous activities that one shouldn't engage in.

According to Winn childhood more and more resembles the purposeful, success-centered, competitive world of adults. She believes that teachers' comments are indicative of this charge. "...so many teachers today comment that their third - or fourth - graders act like tired businessmen instead of like children." (1983:81)

Children experience tremendous pressure to succeed or win. In school this pressure may lead to cheating and this cheating occurs even among the brightest students. In the case of sports bending the rules has become if not accepted certainly expected behavior.

A letter that a Little Leaguer wrote to the Atlanta Braves illustrates this philosophy of cut-throat competition.

> "Dear Braves,
> Our coach says that the most important thing is not just to win but to play fair. So far we haven't won any games. How can we get a coach that plays a little dirty?" (Tutko, 1976:170)

A third area of pressure is the social area. Parents expect their children to be happy and well-adjusted. Adjustment is often interpreted as meaning that the child should be part of the group and should be "socially accepted." Often social acceptability is judged by the number of birthday parties and other invitations the child receives. Children are pushed early into social situations that they may not be ready to participate in. School dances often begin in 5th and 6th grade. Dancing school usually begins in 6th grade. Those children who don't participate or who have no interest in the opposite sex are often made to feel that there is something wrong with them. They may feel left out. If they are forced to participate they may feel awkward, insecure and socially inept. They may be being pushed into situations in which they are too emotionally and socially immature to enjoy. In other words, the activities are out of synch with their biological time clocks. The youth who is pushed into social experiences too early may feel that he or she is a failure. That he has disappointed his parents in that he has not lived up to the social expectations of his parents. Sex education often begins in elementary school and most children by fourth grade have probably read or seen movies dealing

with sex. Discussion of sex today is no longer considered only a adult prerogative. Children are encouraged to ask questions. Children often are aware of the clinical aspects of sex way before they can understand the emotional aspects.

Homosexuality is another topic that even small children are aware of. Winn believes that children's early awareness of sex and homosexuality has created anxiety among preadolescents. "Not having achieved sexual maturity, and with no way of physically testing their sexuality as adolescents can do, they suddenly begin to worry and wonder whether they may turn out to be "faggots" themselves. This anxiety manifests itself in much teasing about homosexuality among today's school children." (1983:153)

Early knowledge of sexuality coupled with early pressure to participate in social activities with the opposite sex can lead to premature emotional and physical involvement with the opposite sex. These are experiences that the youth may be too young to fully understand and unable to deal with rationally and emotionally. Another problem is that everyone tells the youth he should be happy. After all he has all the advantages, "everyone does everything for him" and if he is unhappy it is his own failure or because he is spoiled. From the youth's perspective his parents are unsympathetic to his problems of adjustment. He may come to resent his parents and to feel that his parent's values are inappropriate.

Children are expected to be miniature adults in our society without the social status and privileges of an adult. For example, youths are admonished not to engage in sex or to use alcohol or drugs. The educational and recreational activities they do participate in seem only tangentially related to adult status. The relationship between school work and a future

occupation is often tenuous. After school and summer jobs usually are deadend jobs, such as sales clerk, that have little or no relation to future occupational goals.

Children's dress is also symbolic of this early emphasis on pushing children to grow up quickly. Today even nursery school children wear designer clothes. Status and social acceptance in school among peers is often dependent upon wearing designer jeans and famous brand sneakers such as Pumas and Adidas. The irony is that children are pushed to mature earlier, to be more adult-like at early ages, but the period of adolescence or period that youth are dependent upon parents has increased. There is no rite of passage to adulthood in our society. Legally one is an adult at 18, but in reality adult status is based primarily on financial independence or the person being self-supporting. Most middle class youth go on to college and many go on to graduate school and consequently are still dependent upon parents financially into their twenties. This casts them in a marginal position. Parents still see them as dependents and under their jurisdiction.

These strains of adolescence are further accenuated by the structural changes that have taken place in our society. Peoples ties or bonds to the society, today, are weaker and more amorphous than in the past. Children of corporate parents often move on the average of every two years. They find themselves constantly making new friends and never establishing roots in a community. In suburban areas, there is often no real sense of community. One's neighbors are constantly changing. This thrusts the youth back on his family for emotional support in a time when families have changed too. In this society more and more families are headed by one parent because of high separation and divorce rates. Even if the family is intact, over 50%

of mothers work and children are required to cope more and more on their own. Parents are often experiencing strain or pressure too, which makes for a tense family situation.

Suburban youth also have more leisure time and money available to them then they did in the past. Yet, they have limited opportunities for structured meaningful activities. Increased affluence and leisure encourage youth to be hedonistic.

Parents also reinforce these hedonistic tendencies by constantly telling teenagers that these are their carefree years and that they should have fun and enjoy themselves. This may mean that they have to work at having fun. Teenager parties often involve alcohol, drugs and sexual experimentation. Vandalism, automobile accidents and other types of undesired behavior often evolve from this search for fun. Parents are often worried if their children don't go to parties and date; yet at the same time, worry about drugs and sexual involvement if they do party. Parents often are unsure of what to tell their teenagers and often may give the impression that they'd rather not know what their teenagers are doing.

The youth may find himself under constant strain whether it is for academic achievement or to be part of the social crowd. Peer pressure to experiment with drugs or sex may also be a problem for the youth. The youth may feel that these are issues that he can't discuss with his parents or even his friends.

These youth may at this point in their lives feel that their parents don't understand the youth's concerns or the society in which they live. They may also feel that parents place unrealistic expectations on them without being supportive.

As Elkind states:

> Given a society that puts emphasis on early achievement, when parents do not couple demands for that achievement with a comparable level of support there is disequilibrium in a parent-child contract. When the disequilibrium persists, the result is the "hurried child" achieving even earlier in adult ways, but acquiring as well the tensions born of the pressure to achieve. (1979:42)

The "hurried child" or the child that has been expected to be self reliant and independent at an early age may seem more mature than his more protected counterpart, but unfortunately his manner may mask his emotional immaturity. Winn believes pushing a child for early independence may lead to narcissism in adulthood.

> ...it appears that while a certain level of sophistication and suavity is achieved when a child is forced to take care of himself much of the time, it is not at all the same thing as maturity. As the child grows older, true maturity, defined by the ability to share, to empathize, to sacrifice, to be generous, to love unselfishly, and to nurture and care for children of his own, may prove elusive, and in its place attention seeking and narcissism become the characteristic that define his adult life. (1983:198)

Elkind also worries about the reactions of children to early parental pressure to achieve and believes that some of them may try to escape adulthood by escaping into drugs or cults.

> Such children come to bitterly resent parents, who say, pushed them to excel in school but who never bothered to look at their work, attend parent conferences, or participate in school functions. They often experience a sense of failure, if not in their school performance, then in their ability to impress their parents. Some youth direct their anger at their parents - may do poorly in school or drop out - others may become delinquent or direct anger inward and blame themselves and seek escape in drugs or in religious movements. (1979:42)

Tension can also exist between the parent and child when the parent participates in school activities, if the child feels that the parent is

more interested in the child's achievement than the child. The child may feel the parent's love is conditional on his achievement. That the parent basks only in his accomplishments.

Too much pressure too early can also result in burn out. In academics and sports if the pressures become too great in comparison to the psychic rewards, the activities will no longer give the person a sense of satisfaction. The pleasure of competing is gone and the youth loses interest. In sports this is often seen in a youth who has always played football and goes to college on a football scholarship and quits playing. The purpose of this intense competition may seem irrelevant. If the person is not going to be a professional athlete why exert so much energy, work so hard for no real future payoff. The same with school - the academic work may seem irrelevant to the job situation. In fact in the present economic situation with the scarcity of jobs, one may not see the future payoff for extended academic achievement. The promised rewards are no longer guaranteed.

As Elkind states "Young people are rebelling against the postponement of immediate gratification for later rewards, because they have discovered that the rewards are not forthcoming." (1979:45)

A further problem is the prevalent idea in our society that a child should do better than his parents. Middle class youth with successful parents may be lucky if they can do as well as their parents. A home in the suburbs may no longer be a reality for many of these youth. They may see themselves as failures, as suffering from downward mobility, a fate over which they have no control. They may be bitter that the "American Dream" may have soured or have lost meaning.

These youths may find themselves in a state of anomie (normlessness) unsure of what are appropriate values and goals. They may question the materialism of the society, but see no real substitute. They may lack ties to community, friends and family and feel insecure and adrift. They know that they are suppose to be happy - but are not sure as to what happiness is or how to obtain it. They may be unsure as to what their future goals should be. Further they may feel "weltschmertz" empathy for the world. They may feel guilty for having so much, when others have so little. They may feel guilty to be so unhappy, when they are so affluent. These youth may adapt by dropping out, by retreating to drugs or alcohol, or by suffering from depression. Some may join cults to achieve a sense of belonging and self-worth, others may rebel and act out against the society. The most extreme example of this are middle-class youth who become terrorists.

The future of childhood in the year 2000 will be one of increased pressure to excel. The pressures to achieve will be further accentuated by the constant realization that the world of business is constantly changing and that everyone will have to be able to adapt to changing careers and job demands. The gap between those with educational skills and ability to adapt to constantly changing educational requirements and those without should widen. The distinctions between winners and losers should increase. Saturday schools, summer schools, and specialized after school training may become a norm with the middle classes having an edge over the lower classes. This trend is already evident with the sales of home computers to middle class families and the number of after school and summer programs for children of all ages in computer programming.

It is thus evident that children growing up during the forthcoming turn of the century cannot look forward to a return to that tranquil era of

the fifties. Rather, childhood in the year 2000 will unfortunately be marked by an intensification of the pressures and fears that characterize contemporary times.

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